

Oral/Aural: Pastness and Sound as Medium and Method

Kronos: Southern African Histories Special Issue 2022 Call for Abstracts

Deadline: 15 January 2022

What core contemporary problems do scholars and curators face either studying sound or deploying the sonic as a critical category in the analogue or digital and distributed milieu of contemporary media? What of sound, the past, and Africa as concept, geography, and problem-space (Scott, 2004)? What does it mean to take the convergence of the oral and the aural in studies of sound in and of Africa as an invitation to think about method, medium, and study in relation to sound in general? With this special issue, we invite scholars, artists, and curators to submit critical reflections on sound as a generative problem in historical scholarship and curatorial practice. By drawing together the various threads around sound, medium, method, and pastness as it appears in the work of scholars and practitioners, we intend to galvanise already existing overlaps between interests in sound, technology, and history. We especially encourage submissions resonant with Africa's global location, and which mobilise sound as method and/or disciplinary object in relation to global pasts, in which new temporalities may be made. It is at this intersection that a set of inquiries into the how and the why of historical sound scholarship as it pertains to Africa and the diasporic world can be curated.

In further framing the concerns of this special issue, we draw attention to the growing overlap between the study of sound and several areas of inquiry into notions of the past or pastness. How scholars might work between, and simultaneously with, the oral and the aural, has become a burning question in the last decade, with scholars associated with the established discipline of sound studies turning to the 'global south' to make sense of notions of sound practice, archive, and study that do not translate into a horizontal universalism (Bachir Diagne, Amselle, 2020, Steingo and Sykes, 2019). Similarly, historians have also grappled with sound as a historical phenomenon and the stakes thereof for historical research recently and further back, with some calling for an attention to the aurality of history, or the ways in which the echoes of the archive constitute an encompassing aurality that must be attuned to (Walraven, 2018; Smith et al, 2004). The aurality of history when constituted as a method instead of the inherent structure of sound within the archive, is also a means by which to describe sound in the past as not only vocalisations or speech or orality as well as to be reflexive of the ideological operation of the historian's method as well. To speak of aurality instead of orality is to pay attention to how sound is constituted as sound as well as to acknowledge the role that historical method plays

in constituting sound as such, a point that media archaeology alerts us to repeatedly (Ernst 2016).

Sound has a prominent place in the discussion of African pasts, and musicking and sound practice is a bedrock of African aesthetic and political thought (Stoever, 2016; Reed, 2021). Historically and historiographically, sound has always had several homes in studies of Africa and ideas of Africa: the concept of the voice in anthropology, oral history and linguistics, and its various associated debates around writing and inscription; sound as a foundational ontology of relation in various intellectual traditions; the mediation of sound through the technology of the phonograph, which comes to form the foundation of transcriptive disciplines such as ethnomusicology (Ames, 2003; Erlmann et al; 2004, Peitz; 1989; Brady, 1999). An archive of sonic Africa would trace new intellectual directions in scholarship about the place of sound in an emerging body of critical humanistic scholarship and consider its disciplinary objects afresh in the light of sound as an epistemological problem. Recent renewed public controversies around decolonisation and restitution are alerting global scholars to the growing moral, economic review of slavery and the colonial enterprise and its consequences in disaster and surveillance capitalism. The problem of restitution, for example, is thrown into relief in a planetary age (Chakrabarty and Latour, 2021). What does the preservation of sound mean on such a scale, not just as a practical problem of digital preservation, but as a practice of freedom, an ethics of African futurity? Our temporal scale has many resonances and dissonances.

Elsewhere, African music and its various diasporic iterations across hemispheres has itself produced sonic concepts that exceed the notions of voice, speech, and sonic performance that studies of and from Africa have otherwise conceptualised (Weheliye, 2005; Jaji, 2014). There is a simultaneous use of sound as medium and method as it is woven into how Africa is thought and conceptualised. Outside of the above, the now established field of sound studies and research associated with technology and media studies have also turned to method, asking what the appropriate concepts might be to make sense of the thin boundaries between speech and sonicity. Notions such as acoustemology, soundscape, and the audit are evidence of a larger concern around the porousness of sound as an object of study, whilst musicology has developed its own language around sound as a notated object through the study of sound practice itself. Whilst scholars have concerned themselves with how sound study can take place as a documentary practice, sound practitioners – musicians, sound artists, collectors and curators – have too set to work to think about how the line between the oral and the aural blurs when the sound object is put to different ends. What are the critical practices preexisting or otherwise that we might think with in locating the inquiry from the locations and geographies constituted as outside of the global?

We welcome submissions that directly address or are broadly interested in:

- sound and historiography, history, and the African past
- critical sound and archival practice
- orality and aurality
- music and musical practice
- sound as medium
- sound as disciplinary object
- sonic cartographies/geographies of Africa

We invite scholars and practitioners in the following areas of interest and disciplines to contribute:

- historical acoustemology
- sonic/aural or music history
- sensory studies
- music studies, musicology, ethnomusicology
- archival and collecting practice
- sound art and musical practice
- oral history and disciplinary histories of sonic apprehension and representation
- linguistics and histories of language and sound
- DJ scholarship, and curatorial practices around sound and the past
- other forms of sonic object focused performative and compositional work

Please submit an abstract no longer than 350 words to aerasmus@uwc.ac.za by 15 January 2022. By late January 2022, authors will be notified whether to submit a full article for peer review by late March 2022. Please note that invitations to submit articles for peer review do not guarantee publication, and that articles selected for publication after peer review will be included in the 2022 volume of *Kronos*. Please provide a short biography (30 words maximum) and kindly save your abstract and bio to a file that is named: Surname, First Name, oralaural. Any queries should be addressed to Aidan Erasmus at aerasmus@uwc.ac.za or Valmont Layne at vlayne@uwc.ac.za.

Works Cited

Ames, Eric. "The sound of evolution." *Modernism/modernity* 10.2 (2003): 297-325.

Brady, Erika. *A spiral way: How the phonograph changed ethnography*. Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1999.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh, and Bruno Latour. *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*. The University of Chicago Press, 2021.

Diagne, Souleymane Bachir, et al. *In search of Africa (s): universalism and decolonial thought*. Polity, 2020.

Erlmann, Veit. "Hearing Cultures: Essays on Sound." *Listening, and Modernity* (2004).

Ernst, Wolfgang. *Sonic time machines*. Amsterdam University Press, 2016.

Jaji, Tsitsi Ella, and Tsitsi Jaji. *Africa in stereo: Modernism, music, and pan-African solidarity*. Oxford University Press, 2014.

Peitz, William. "The Phonograph in Africa: International Phonocentrism from Stanley to Sarnoff." *Post-Structuralism and the Question of History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

Reed, Anthony. "Soundworks." *Soundworks*. Duke University Press, 2021.

Scott, David. *Conscripts of modernity*. Duke University Press, 2004.

Smith, Mark Michael, eds. *Hearing history: A reader*. University of Georgia Press, 2004.

Steingo, Gavin, and Jim Sykes, eds. *Remapping sound studies*. Duke University Press, 2019.

Stoeve, Jennifer Lynn. *The sonic color line: Race and the cultural politics of listening*. NYU Press, 2016.

Walraven, Maarten. "History and its acoustic context: Silence, resonance, echo and where to find them in the archive." *Journal of Sonic Studies* 4.1 (2013).

Weheliye, Alexander G. *Phonographies*. Duke University Press, 2005.